



How to Manage Refugee Helplines

A few tips to help organisations cope with emergency calls

In refugee emergencies, humanitarian organisations usually experience a sharp increase in the number of telephone calls. If they continue managing calls like before, this will invariably overwhelm the staff and frustrate the callers. A few simple and inexpensive measures suffice to create a call centre. With an efficient helpline in place, organisations can reduce the number of people coming to their premises and save themselves and the refugees time and money.

Advantages of telephone helplines

Why helplines?

In many cases refugees only need information. It is not necessary that they travel to an office, wait for long hours and use valuable staff time to get a simple answer.

If standard cases are dealt with on the phone, humanitarian workers have more capacity to deal with more complex cases. Also, qualified humanitarian workers should not spend their time repeating standard information over and over again.

Why office phones are not enough

On a normal office phone one caller can reach one person. If that person takes many calls, the line will often be busy. So refugees will dial all office numbers available, clogging the lines and engaging multiple staff members for simple enquiries. Refugees are likely to reach staff members who do not know the answer to that specific question and run around trying to get it, creating stress for themselves and colleagues.

From the callers' perspective lines are either busy (office hours) or no one is answering (outside office hours). So they will come to the office nonetheless.

Technical requirements for setting up call centres

Automatic Call Distributor

Automatic Call Distribution or ACD, is a tool commonly used in any office that handles a large volume of inbound calls. The primary purpose of an Automatic Call Distributor is to disperse incoming calls to contact centre agents.

ACE systems are either stand-alone boxes or can be supplied by your telephone service

provider. The telephone company groups as many telephone lines as needed in one single number. Helpline calls can even be forwarded to cell phones.

Prices depend on the required capacity Automatic Call Distributor, starting from a few hundred US Dollars. Get technical advice before deciding on a system.

Interactive voice response

Interactive voice response (IVR) allows callers to interact with the telephone system via a telephone keypad or by speech recognition. (“If you need information on XYZ press 1/say yes...”). Experience with Syrian refugees shows that callers are impatient and worried about telephone costs and will press any button if there are more than two options



The use of IVR and voice automation allows callers' standard queries to be resolved without the need for queuing. If callers do not find the information they need or require further assistance, their calls are transferred to an agent.

Voicemail

Voicemail is a computer based system that allows callers to leave messages (e.g. outside office hours) which the agent can deal with at a later point in time..

Good operators make good helplines

The ability of Helpline operators (called “agents” in call centred business) to provide accurate information decides the success of the entire project.

Informed

Telephone agents need to have all the necessary information. They need to be kept abreast of changes and developments.

Standardised

All agents must have the same level of information, so there is no contradiction in what they are telling the refugees. Standard Q and A should be prepared in advance.

Calm and friendly

Agents must remain calm and friendly at all times, even when dealing with distressed or aggressive callers or mental cases. (It is better for an organisation to deal with such people over the phone than to have them come in.)

Purposeful

It is the agent’s job to obtain all the necessary data from the caller in the shortest possible time. They have to ask polite leading questions and not allow people to rant.

Analytical

Call centres should not only register the number and duration of calls. They should also record and analyse the content of enquiries, obtaining data on the main problems refugees are faced with and on information gaps.

Productive

A well-organised call centre should be able to bring the majority of cases to a conclusion in one conversation to keep the number of referrals to a minimum

Inbound and outbound

If the agent cannot reply immediately to an enquiry (inbound call) but needs to obtain additional information, they must make sure that the refugee gets called back (outbound call) as promised.